Stabilising Fragile States

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High-profile international stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq in recent years have accentuated the growing centrality of fragile states to global security. Indeed, one of the most central lessons from the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States is that in an age of globalisation, no country, regardless of how poor and seemingly remote it is, can be ignored without incurring security risks. Afghanistan, where plans for the attacks were undertaken, has long ranked at the very bottom of world poverty indices. The July 2010 soccer World Cup bombings in Kampala were organised in Somalia. The attempted May 2010 car-bombing in Times Square in New York and the failed Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing were planned in Yemen. These episodes, and the potentially more lethal capacity that modern technology provides terrorists, underscore that fragile states present grim dangers to the international community.

In addition to providing havens for terrorists, fragile states are destabilising to their regions. When left to fester, fragile states don't simply implode and fizzle out. Rather, they tend to metastasise and engulf neighbouring countries—and beyond. Pakistan's ungoverned tribal areas, which have been an Achilles' heel for the Afghanistan stabilisation effort as well as an insulated shelter for Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, are a case in point. Similarly, West Africa is still recovering from the chaos of Liberia under Charles Taylor. The fragility of the former Yugoslavia resulted in a domino succession of wars that menaced south-eastern Europe for a decade. Colombia's decades-long insurgency has incubated international cocaine traffickers who now threaten to undermine numerous Caribbean and West African states. And radical extremism in Algeria, which morphed into "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM), now imperils large expanses of the Sahel.

Adding to the concern is that there are more than just a handful of fragile states ticking away. According to the State Fragility Index of the US think tank, the Center for Systemic Peace, there are twenty-eight states at an extreme or high level of fragility. Notably, twenty-three of the twenty-eight are in Africa.

Sobered by the enormous cost in lives, budgets, effort, time, and popular support that stabilisation operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have incurred, international

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enthusiasm for engaging in other fragile states is limited. This, coupled with the complex political, economic, and social undercurrents of fragile states, has led some to question whether stabilisation is genuinely needed or even feasible. They argue it would be more realistic to narrow the focus to targeting the key troublemakers in these contexts, leaving it up to local actors to deal with stabilisation.

In fact, this approach was tried for much of the past twenty years in Somalia—and the last several decades in Afghanistan—and elsewhere. Not only did these parochial efforts fail (not least because targeting destabilising actors requires excellent intelligence that can be gained only from being on the ground), but these countries have since grown more unstable—and dangerous.

Often lost in this discussion is that the track record of stabilising fragile states over the past two decades has yielded a number of relative successes, including Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Croatia, Kosovo, East Timor, El Salvador, and Colombia. While all are still works in progress, each of these countries is immeasurably better off—and poses less of a threat to its neighbours and the global community—because of international stabilisation efforts.

Better to accept that stabilising fragile states is a collective challenge of the contemporary international security era and to learn from the wealth of experience gained in recent decades so as to make these undertakings as effective and efficient as possible. Indeed, there are currently peacekeeping operations in fourteen of the twenty-eight most fragile states—and other forms of stabilisation under way in most of the others—that would benefit from these insights.

What Makes a State Fragile?

State fragility is often seen as a function of resource limitations. And, in fact, poverty is a key factor. Low-income countries are nine to ten times more susceptible to conflict than middle- and upper-income countries. Yet, poverty is frequently only one dimension of state fragility. More accurately, poverty is a symptom of more serious challenges stemming from illegitimate claims to power, unaccountable governance, systematic inequities, corruption, and repression.

That is, poverty is not inherently destabilising. Tanzania, Malawi, Senegal, Namibia, Zambia, the Dominican Republic, and Mongolia, for example, are low-income countries that have a strong track record of stability. Rather, poverty creates an environment in which grievances about political illegitimacy and the lack of services can be exploited by (at times) opportunistic actors wishing to profit (economically or politically) from the instability.

Legitimacy is an enormously powerful stabilising force, especially in poor countries, since leaders who come to power through legal means and with the support of at least a plurality of the population have unparalleled authority to govern. To

maintain that support, they also have incentives to pursue policies that benefit the largest possible share of the population.

Leaders who come to power through coups, fraudulent elections, or other illegitimate means rely on their narrow base of supporters to govern, typically utilising patronage networks and ethnic, geographic, or ideological allegiances that necessarily include the security sector. For a time, the reinforcing vortex of political and economic monopolies strengthens a regime's hold on power—and its ability to put down protests. Some interpret this as stability. However, unreconstructed, this governance model ultimately hollows out. The nature of exclusive power-structures demands that a disproportionate share of opportunities and resources flows to those with privileged access. Inequities and corruption are part and parcel of this system. Unsurprisingly, autocratically governed societies frequently have corruption rankings 40–50 per cent greater than democratic systems at comparable income levels. Autocracies are also 30 per cent more likely to experience civil conflict.

This is borne out in the Center for Systemic Peace's list of twenty-eight contemporary fragile states, 60 per cent of which have autocratic governments. Autocracies form the bulk of the twelve fragile states that are facing conflict and of the eight others that are experiencing deteriorating stability. Those with nascent democratic institutions, in contrast, make up most cases that are on the recovering end of the fragile-state spectrum. Meanwhile, contrary to popular perception, only one fragile state truly has no central government: Somalia.

Their inherent inequities make illegitimate governance models perpetual sources of instability. Allocation of resources based on personal allegiances, rather than merit or innovation, stifles productivity, contributing to economic stagnation and worsening unemployment. Most of the population in these societies feels shut out of opportunities for advancement, financially, socially, or politically. Laws are applied discriminately, depending on one's ties to the party leadership. Most citizens have little hope for change. Accordingly, there is a built-in high level of dissonance and distrust of government.

Importantly, leaving aside the still unfolding Arab Spring, those mobilising violent insurgencies in today's fragile states tend not to be champions of justice intent on establishing a democratic society. More typically, they are opportunists seeking economic, political, or ideological gain. They can do so only by tapping into (and cultivating) perceived societal grievances and antipathy towards the government. This is epitomised, for example, by the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa, by al-Shabaab in Somalia, by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, by AQIM in the Sahel, by the constantly mutating rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Accordingly, while a regime may be corrupt, unresponsive and unaccountable, that does not mean that replacing it with insurgent leaders (with even less legitimacy and commitment to accountability) will lead to better outcomes.

While legitimacy is vital, it is insufficient to ensure stability. Spoilers can be ruthless in their use of violence to weaken a government and intimidate a population. This was the approach of the Revolutionary United Front in challenging the democratically elected government in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Likewise, AQIM uses kidnappings and terrorist attacks to isolate communities in democratic Mali's northern region. Consequently, legitimate governments must be capable of defending themselves and their populations from internally and externally driven attempts at destabilisation. This means fielding a professional and efficient security force. It also entails maintaining social cohesion in the face of divisive tactics aimed at fragmenting the populace along ethnic or geographic lines. Legitimate states must also be able to deliver basic social services valued by citizens so as to demonstrate the tangible benefits of government—and to douse attempts by spoilers to fan grievances into a blaze of dissatisfaction.

The upshot is that there is a powerful psychological dimension to state fragility. While genuine grievances undoubtedly exist, the degree to which a government is viewed by the public as an honest broker rather than a self-serving elite frames the relationship between leaders and society. An equally powerful psychological consideration is the prospect for change in the future. If dim, then the perceived justification for violence escalates. In short, winning the battle for public support, as much as defeating purveyors of organised violence, is the linchpin for stabilising fragile states.

Stabilisation Priorities

The complex political, social, and economic underpinnings to state fragility highlight the scale of the task of attempting to stabilise weak polities. Fragile states cannot be remedied solely by responding to the symptoms of instability or through a singular focus on military action. Rather, the drivers of instability are deep-seated and institutional in nature. They typically have emerged after a long period of state deterioration. As a result, the starting point is often a dysfunctional state, one where norms of inequity and corruption have been engrained over a period of decades. Fragile states are not turned around instantly.

Nevertheless, past experience indicates that it is far less complicated to stabilise a fragile state at an early stage of deterioration than one that has collapsed in conflict. The range of activities and actors that can be engaged is much greater. It will also be less costly, with some estimates putting pre-conflict intervention at sixty times less expensive than a post-conflict stabilisation effort.[1]

Yet, it is not enough to remove the destructive features of an old system. Rather, a positive institutional structure must be created if stability is to be achieved and endure. In other words, stabilising fragile states is frequently a state-building exercise. While not a label many policymakers want to use, acknowledging this reality will facilitate more effective interventions. The objective is not simply to rebuild the (dysfunctional) institutions that existed previously. New structure, norms, and incentives are needed.

In stabilising fragile states, priority should be given to addressing the vulnerabilities of instability: illegitimacy, a weak security sector, and relative deprivation. Tackling each of these three deficiencies is important and mutually reinforcing. Accordingly, they need to be addressed simultaneously. Action on each, however, should be measured in terms of how it builds trust and support within the general population as this is ultimately what enhances stability while limiting the materiel backing and foot-soldiers that sustain an insurgency.

The predominant drivers of fragility vary from context to context and this will shape the contours of any given stabilisation programme. To the extent that a legitimate government is in place, greater attention can be given to strengthening the security sector and delivery of social goods. In such contexts, the national government should be in the lead. If the government suffers from a legitimacy gap, then this must be the focus of a stabilisation effort, with a relatively greater share of the undertaking managed by external actors. In this way, an assortment of hybrid models may be viable. Indeed, in recent years, regional bodies such as the African Union and its sub-regional constituents, such as the Economic Community of West African States, have been stepping up to take on a much more active role in stabilising Africa's fragile states.

Political Legitimacy and Trust

A legitimate, effective political system is the backbone of a stabilisation operation. A leadership that came to power through legitimate means has earned the authority to govern in the eyes of the population and is perhaps the single most powerful force for stability. Legitimacy reduces the basis for claims of political grievance that spoilers can use to incite challenges to government leadership. Accordingly, establishing a legitimate, effective political framework should be the operational focus of all other aspects of stabilising fragile states.

State effectiveness enables a government to deliver public goods and services to the population—starting with their protection from organised violence. This provides tangible benefits in the lives of ordinary citizens. Legitimacy does not automatically translate into effectiveness. But the attributes of accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness inherent to legitimate governance do tend to generate more effective performance.

The starting point for most fragile states, however, is that of an unrepresentative and ineffective political leadership. The intercommunal inequities generated by exclusive governing structures, moreover, fracture any sense of a common national identity that may have existed.

Political legitimacy is most authoritatively established by earning a popular mandate through competitive, participatory elections. Political leaders maintain their legitimacy by adhering to and applying the law in an even-handed manner. Accordingly, if

conditions dictate the holding of elections, these can provide enormous momentum to a stabilisation process. The elections that brought Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to power in Liberia in 2005 were a pivotal point in that country's turnaround to date. Moreover, the legitimacy she gained from this process gave her the authority to confront deep-seated corruption aggressively and embark on the security-sector reform and other institutional changes that were needed. In the same way, it is imperative that international supporters recognise that elections are the beginning and not the end of the reconstruction process.

Paradoxically, in most post-conflict contexts, it is preferable not to rush forward with elections. The political climate in these situations is often highly polarised, and a quick shift to electoral competition would favour incumbent structures and could be explosive. If feasible, it would be better first to establish the rules of the game that guarantee basic rights and protections to losing parties and which provide incentives for intercommunal coalition-building. In many societies that have long been autocratically governed, there is also a need to develop a reliable voting registry, establish an independent electoral commission, create political parties that can take policy agendas to the public, introduce a free press and a consensus against incitements to violence and hate speech, and provide general civic education on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, among other things. With such measures in place, the electoral process is more likely to have the desired legitimacy-enhancing effect. The more typical reality, however, is that domestic pressures will require holding elections earlier than may be desirable. Nonetheless, using the time available to create as level a playing field as possible prior to elections will have positive long-term consequences for stability.

In weak legitimacy contexts where competitive elections are not on the horizon, the focus should be on strengthening checks and balances. This would include strengthening parliamentary capacity, bolstering independent media, working more directly with sub- national leaders, encouraging professional and business associations, and supporting civil society. Strengthening the capacity of independent corruption-investigating bodies can also help dilute the debilitating effects of political and economic monopolies. In contexts where legitimacy is a concern, international actors should also avoid direct payments to a national government unless adequate oversight is in place. Otherwise, these resources are just as likely to exacerbate the inequities and underlying tensions as to resolve them.

Notably, instability often unfolds at the local rather than national level. For example, we find instability in northern Mali, or in Nigeria's Niger Delta, Sudan's Darfur region, and the Tri-Border Area of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. In addition to providing a focal point for stabilisation efforts, these realities often point to acute governance weaknesses at the local level—typically reflecting a microcosm of the drivers to instability discussed earlier. Particularly common is a systematic disregard for local minority rights. In such cases, greater central government and civil society oversight is often called for to ensure a sufficient level of accountability at the local level.

Attention to strengthening local governance structures is further warranted because the national-level political landscape in fragile states that have experienced crisis may take a long time to settle (as, for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Afghanistan). Opportunities to advance stability on other fronts should not be delayed in the meantime. Engaging at the local level also provides an opportunity to empower technocrats who can provide direction based on best practices rather than political considerations. The experience of ministry staff electing their own leaders to replace appointees of the former ruling party in the early days of the Tunisian transition in 2011 is a case in point.

Trust is a central ingredient in the legitimacy-building process. Trust engenders public support and, therefore, co-operation and stability. Public trust is built by the government's establishing a reputation for honesty in its statements, for fairness, and for acting in the best interests of the general population. This will require acknowledging when mistakes are made, followed by transparent investigations to identify causes and remedy problems. Many populations in fragile-state contexts are accustomed to the propaganda promulgated by their political leaders—and are deeply sceptical of any official message smacking of spin. Accordingly, trust-building communications must be based on authenticity.

That said, it is imperative that domestic and international actors involved in a stabilisation effort communicate the positive initiatives they are undertaking. It should not be assumed that these are self-evident to the public. Rather, information vacuums are generally filled with rumours and misinformation. Indeed, to mobilise support, spoilers rely heavily on tilting the narrative in as damaging a light as possible for the government. Moreover, what media exist will tend to focus on the negative and sensational.

Communications should also be seen as a two-way stream. Initiating an inclusive consultative dialogue with the public provides an opportunity to hear priorities, concerns, and suggestions from local communities. This can be supported by public opinion surveys and outreach. Such engagement should be from a domestic (rather than international) perspective, and demonstrate cultural awareness and sensitivity. These dialogues should be in local languages and use respected personalities and accessible media. The growing availability of mobile phones has dramatically expanded these options. Many poor communities, however, still primarily rely on radio.

Actions, of course, speak louder than words. Government spending on roads, education, health, agriculture, security, power projects, or other activities that are seen as generating tangible benefits for a population earn public confidence. Transparency in the budgeting process, similarly, builds trust that public resources are being used in the interests of the majority.

Conversely, perceptions of government corruption puncture public trust. Corruption instils in the public a sense of betrayal and injustice. Experience shows that a public

is willing to endure great hardship as long as this burden is fairly shared. However, once the perception is created that leaders are profiting at the expense of the ordinary citizen, public trust is badly fractured. Similarly, corruption is contagious. Once it is believed that senior leaders are involved in corruption, the justification for others inside and outside of government to engage in such practices increases. Corruption, moreover, is debilitating to stabilisation efforts. Not only is it demoralising for supporters of stabilisation, but the strong emotions generated provide a propaganda bonanza for spoilers.

Security: Building Solidarity with Communities

While political reconciliation is the ultimate requirement in stabilising fragile states, it is predicated on there being a secure enough environment for political dialogue to unfold. Creating this space defines the security mission and is the top priority for a fragile state.

Creating space for the political and economic sectors to gain traction demands that security efforts focus on the safety of the population. That is, the operational objective is to protect population centres (and major transportation arteries supporting population movement and trade into these centres). The resulting safety enables citizens to go about their normal routines, and garners popular support for the government.

If a stabilisation effort is initiated at an early enough stage, the domestic security sector would logically take the lead. If fragility has deteriorated to a point where the domestic security sector does not have the capacity, credibility, or will to respond, then international stabilisation forces will need to fill this role.

Avoiding population displacement is an imperative of a population-centric stabilisation strategy. A displaced population is both a symptom of and a potential contributor to instability. The process of being uprooted results in the loss of livelihoods, land, and household assets. Dislocated populations, furthermore, are apt to be embittered with the sitting government, either for directly causing the instability (as in Darfur) or for failing to prevent it (as in the Democratic Republic of Congo). Traumatised, vulnerable to future attacks, and without a political outlet to effect change, communities of displaced persons are prime recruiting grounds for spoilers.

The irregular nature of the security threat in most of today's fragile states demands a two-tiered security approach. The first tier is a sustained on-the-ground presence of forces in population centres to provide the protection that is the foundation of a stabilisation effort. A hard-earned lesson from nearly every stabilisation experience is that these forces need to be deployed in sufficient numbers to achieve the stabilising effect. Deploying too few troops limits the area that can be stabilised and, in turn, the operational space for political and economic reconstruction. Indeed, this is the challenge facing the African Union in Somalia today, and was the defining feature of the stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan from the toppling of the Taliban government in December 2001 until 2008.

An inadequate commitment of troops also allows instability to fester, mutate, and metastasise, generating a more pernicious threat to domestic and international security. As important as their numbers is the conduct of troops. Again, working from a playbook focused on gaining the support of the local population, there is a premium on getting out into the community regularly in small units, engaging citizens respectfully, demonstrating a co-operative rather than a hostile attitude, and showing cultural sensitivity. This relationship-building forges the trust central to generating popular support for a stabilisation effort.

Many of these population protection roles involve functions typically handled by a police force. In most fragile-state contexts, however, the police are unable or unwilling to respond to the identified security threats. Indeed, the police frequently show up in opinion surveys as being among the most corrupt institutions in fragile states. Consequently, national or international militaries frequently need to take on these critical responsibilities.

The second tier of security focus is maintaining pressure on insurgent leaders. Organising an insurgency effort is a major management challenge. It requires recruiting, training, supplying, feeding, raising funds for and motivating forces, while holding together what are often fractious coalitions and less than fully committed fighters. By sustaining relentless pressure on insurgent leaders at each of these organising stages, a counter-insurgency operation can severely degrade an irregular force's capability to destabilise.

An upshot of this is that offence is an integral component of a population-centric security effort. Indeed, offensive measures are sometimes the most effective means of protecting civilians and keeping spoilers off balance. The British-led offensive on positions of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone in 2000 is frequently cited as the turning point in that stabilisation effort.

Effective offensive action in a context where destabilising actors take cover among local communities requires excellent intelligence, mobility, and the ability to deliver force in a precise and controlled manner. Minimising civilian casualties in these targeted strikes is imperative. Recalling that the overarching mandate of the stabilisation effort is to gain the trust and support of the local population, the inadvertent killing and injuring of innocent civilians is a highly emotive outcome that will quickly sour community relations, regardless of whatever good work might have been done. Indeed, precipitating just such indiscriminate responses is part of the spoiler's playbook. News of such casualties will surely be trumpeted by insurgent leaders to amplify the negative effect. Consequently, discipline and discrimination in the use of force are critical in fragile-state contexts.

The security sector can further establish trust with local communities by being responsive to their protection needs. Since the security threat in most fragile states consists of small bands of highly mobile irregular forces, it is unlikely the state security sector will have the same quality of information on insurgent movements it would if

confronting a standing army. It can ameliorate this and enhance its capacity to provide protection by establishing ongoing channels of communication with vulnerable towns and villages. With such communication networks in place, aided by the growing accessibility of mobile phones, the security sector is better able to respond in real-time to communities that face attack or observe suspicious activity. Indeed, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Congo (known by its French acronym MONUSCO) has seen considerable improvements in community support since the introduction of such twenty- four-hour village call-centres in 2009.

Development: Popular Ownership and Hope for the Future

By expanding opportunities, reducing perceptions of relative deprivation, and providing credible hope for a better future, sustained development reduces the pool of potential recruits for a spoiler. In this way, development is a tangible arena in which the battle for popular support takes place. Yet, development initiatives are unlikely to deter insurgency leaders who are typically motivated by political or economic aims. Consequently, as with the political and security pillars of stability, development, on its own, is insufficient to stabilise a fragile state.

It should also be recognised that developmental progress (e.g., improved public health, school enrolment, access to clean drinking water, etc.) takes time to materialise, even in stable contexts. In the meantime, from a stabilisation perspective, it is important that development initiatives demonstrate positive momentum, government interest in the wellbeing of the general population, and opportunities for public participation (and therefore a sense of ownership).

Key to the effectiveness of any development initiative is the process through which it is undertaken. Since resources are power, the question of who controls development funding has implications. Historically, the bulk of development resources has flowed through central governments. If, as in most cases of state fragility, unaccountable leadership at the national level is at the root of the instability, then such an approach will only exacerbate the problem. Indeed, one of the greatest risks international actors face is inadvertently empowering the very forces that have perpetuated the unrepresentative, inequitable, corrupt, and repressive systems in place. Channelling resources through the government simply because it is the government on the assumption that this will contribute to stability is naive, as experience in Zimbabwe, Sudan, Tunisia, Egypt, Afghanistan, and many other countries has shown.

Development initiatives can also help redress the causes of state fragility by embracing the themes of equity and transparency. Participation in stabilisation initiatives must be inclusive of all individuals or households meeting the selection criteria. Such inclusion reduces perceptions of unfairness that drive instability. Well-designed programmes should also ensure local staff represent the ethnic diversity of the population served. Similarly, experience has shown that local jurisdictions with representative police forces are less likely to face conflict. This practice also helps model and create incentives for co-operative behaviour.

The following development sectors stand out for their stability-enhancing potential:

Controlling Inflation

Rampant inflation is arguably the most destabilising economic factor in a deteriorating fragile state or post-conflict setting. Rapidly rising prices caused by an oversupply of, or declining confidence in, a currency result in a sharp drop in household income and savings. Zimbabwe is the most prominent contemporary example. Robert Mugabe's increasingly autocratic and patronage-based government had run the productive sectors of the economy into the ground by the mid-2000s. The Zimbabwe dollar consequently started losing value at an accelerated pace, peaking at an inflation rate of 2.3 million per cent in 2008.

The rapidly deteriorating value of money sets in motion a psychology of immediate consumption, a seizing-up of credit markets, an unwillingness to invest in long-term projects, and an undermining of contracts. Capital flight ensues, leaving even fewer assets to invest and stimulate the local economy. Inflation is particularly hard on the poor, who are already living on the margin. A rise in the price of food, housing, transportation, or medicine by even 5 to 10 per cent means they will go without basic necessities. The poor, moreover, are much more reliant on a cash economy—and therefore more vulnerable to its fluctuations.

Fragile states are also more vulnerable to inflation since they are likely to have inherited high levels of debt. Since payments on this debt are likely to be in arrears, negotiating new lines of credit will take time. Yet, the prompt availability of financing to provide basic services, such as security and law enforcement, is important for building support for a new government in post-conflict settings.

Employment

To the extent that support for an insurgency is rooted in lack of economic opportunities, creating jobs is a linchpin of stabilisation. Jobs generate incomes. Income injects capital into local markets, stimulating demand for goods and services (and private- sector jobs) throughout the target region. As such, jobs have the potential to redress perceptions of grievances and a lack of alternatives. They also create broader social benefits, including a sense of routine and normalcy—a vital psychological effect in a conflict-affected context characterised by high levels of tension and unpredictability.

While the importance of job creation for stabilisation is well understood, there is less awareness of the steps needed to boost employment. Large-scale, labour-intensive, public-sector work programmes are the most effective means of creating opportunities in the short term. However, these initiatives are not sustainable over the long term. Rather, generating sustainable employment requires a vibrant private sector. Accordingly, short- term employment initiatives should be undertaken in a way that will not inadvertently undermine prospects for the emergence of a healthy private sector.

Key to maximising the stabilisation benefits of a jobs programme is the selection process for workers. The priority target should be unemployed male youths, especially demobilised soldiers, who might otherwise be persuaded to support an insurgency or extremist group.

Women should also be given priority in the selection process. Women suffer disproportionately in conflict-affected contexts in terms of loss of income, displacement, personal insecurity and sexual violence. Given that they are often the heads of households and support many other family members, creating reliable income opportunities for women also has important stabilisation benefits.

The tasks undertaken in public works schemes will normally be fairly straightforward labour-intensive roles (e.g., collecting garbage, clearing bush, maintaining roads, constructing drainage canals, planting trees, terracing, making bricks, collecting rocks for infrastructure projects, and so forth). Since the objective of the initiative is labour mobilisation, the actual activity selected is secondary. That is, these public works projects should not be delayed pending identification of sophisticated engineering or other technical expertise.

The infrastructure generated through public works programmes, however, can contribute to long-term economic efficiency and productivity, and is thus a potentially valuable component of a stability-enhancing development strategy. To realise these benefits, the infrastructure must be appropriate to and sustainable in the local context. Introducing sophisticated solar-powered water pumps may have many convincing justifications from an efficiency standpoint, but if the spare parts, tools, and know-how to operate and maintain the pumps are not available locally, this technological "progress" will soon become a white elephant. For this reason, it is imperative that a heavy dose of local expertise guide the planning and implementation of these infrastructural projects.

Similarly, it should be recognised that the infrastructure generated by the works programmes could almost always be created more quickly and efficiently using heavy equipment and outside experts. That misses the point of the initiative, however, which is to put as many of the target population to work as quickly as possible. Likewise, the low- tech focus of the works programmes in a stabilisation setting is intentional. Besides being easier to implement, this approach is less risky. It creates fewer valuable assets that become attractive targets to insurgents. It thereby has conflict-mitigating value and also saves costs and promotes sustainability.

It is common in fragile-state contexts to face a trade-off between economic efficiency and stability. In many fragile states, the public sector is the largest employer. Public- sector workers, however, are often part of a bloated government bureaucracy, contributing relatively little added value in public goods and services. The rational conclusion drawn by many economists is to call for dramatic cutbacks. The idea is that slashing government payrolls will free budgetary resources for other priorities and jolt the system towards transformation. It will also increase the supply of workers in

the labour market, keeping wages low, thereby stimulating private-sector hiring and entrepreneurship. Yet, creating such massive unemployment, all at once, will have a profound impact on national equilibrium. Many of these government workers are supporting large households. Their sudden loss of income, therefore, creates many more desperate people. The effect could be highly destabilising (especially when members of the security forces are among those dropped from the payrolls). Consequently, economic decision-making in fragile states should not be based on efficiency criteria alone.

Agriculture

In most fragile states, some 70 per cent of households earn their livelihoods through agriculture. Moreover, since agriculture is typically labour-intensive, it can absorb many

unskilled workers and should be a priority sector for a stabilisation programme. In addition to jobs, the agricultural sector has other stabilising benefits for an economy, including food (contributing to supply and lowering prices), assets, savings, stimulus to off-farm enterprises (such as millers, processors, and transporters), exports and foreign-exchange earnings, demand for inputs, rural roads and other infrastructure, and feed for livestock. In short, agriculture is the engine of a rural economy. Investments in this sector can have a powerful cumulative effect throughout an economy.

A stabilisation programme can revive and jump-start a disrupted agricultural sector by ensuring that farmers have the basic inputs they need to work. The most critical of these is seed. Not only must farmers have access to sufficient quantities of seed, but these must be appropriate for the local context. To maximise the stabilisation objective, it is essential that the vast majority of farmers gain access to productive seed in time for planting. In this way, the rural economy can recover in as short a time as possible.

Natural Resource Management

Sixty per cent of the twenty-eight countries listed as most vulnerable on the Center for Systemic Peace's State Fragility Index are considered rich in natural resources. The common assumption that these resources will be a boon for recovery overlooks past experience and the powerful contributing role that they play in perpetuating weak institutions and fragility. Many countries are subject to the "natural-resource curse"—the paradox that they experience relatively higher levels of underdevelopment, corruption, and conflict. A primary reason for this paradox is that natural-resource revenues amplify the political and economic distortions that exist in many fragile states. Control of these revenues dramatically enhances the ability of autocratic authorities to pay for the patronage and security networks that allow them to maintain their exclusive hold on power.

There is a strong argument that the most stabilising action to take regarding natural resources in fragile states is to leave them in the ground. This would cut off the flow of revenues that feed the deepening cycle of corruption, economic distortion, underdevelopment, and violence.

There are normally enormous political pressures to continue to draw on these resources, however, especially if the extractive infrastructure is already in place. The emphasis, therefore, should be on creating accountability mechanisms to help ensure that these revenues are used for positive ends. Such mechanisms include establishing with the nascent government a protocol whereby all new resource revenues are documented and publicly reported. Having this as a starting point will greatly improve the ability of watchdog groups to monitor how these resources are spent. If a parliament is in place, requiring legislative approval for any natural-resource contract and revenue disbursement strategy would also facilitate a public dialogue over how these resources may best serve the national interest in a rational and transparent manner.

Strengthening Local Financial Institutions

The extent to which job creation will have ripple effects for the rest of the rural economy depends to a significant degree on the depth of a society's financial institutions. Fragile states typically suffer from a dearth of financial institutions that provide citizens with options for managing savings and credit. This, in turn, severely constrains access to capital to launch small businesses (spurring employment).

Creating viable, accessible financial institutions requires deep familiarity with the local population. It also entails establishing means of assessing the credit-worthiness of clients and the viability of business plans, creating incentives for the repayment of loans (e.g., collateral or peer groups), and setting fees, interest rates, and loan levels (often much smaller than the norm in most international contexts) that are financially sustainable and within the means of the mostly rural clients. These processes take time and require sectoral and cultural expertise. Experience has shown that attempts to build rural financial institutions on the fly and without the requisite expertise almost always backfire. If borrowers assess that there is little expectation of repayment (or penalty for failing to pay), the default rates skyrocket, undercutting the financial viability of the institutions as well as contract-enforcement norms more generally. Accordingly, stabilisation efforts should attempt to link up with established independent rural-based financial networks to accelerate the functionality of these institutions.

Encouraging the development of small business associations will also strengthen local financial institutions. Business associations represent a network for sharing information, best practices, and lessons learned among local entrepreneurs. They similarly provide a collective mechanism for protecting small businesses that are denied access to credit, land, or licences—and a fulcrum for championing reforms to improve the local business climate. More broadly, small-business owners are generally forces of stability. Creating business networks independent of government control, moreover, is particularly important in contexts where there has long been a concentration of power.

Health

Access to primary healthcare is a basic need that is consistently ranked as a top priority by communities in low-income countries. Households will travel many miles at great expense to benefit from the services of a healthcare provider. Indeed, the lack of a public health network contributes to higher rates of preventable deaths and explains why morbidity and mortality rates in fragile states are higher than those in more stable settings. Lack of access to any formal health services, accordingly, is a source of great personal insecurity. Conversely, expanding access to basic health services dramatically shapes perceptions of government responsiveness and effectiveness.

The first priority in a health intervention in a fragile-state setting is almost invariably to gather information. Given the weak institutional environment typical of fragile states, data are unlikely to be readily available. Rapid surveys of household health will be required. The information thus gathered will help public-health officials to prioritise among the myriad of challenges they face.

The implementation of this package also provides an opportunity to mobilise a network of community-based health workers, generating valuable local participation in the stabilisation process. This helps build a stronger sense of domestic ownership as well as greater support for the broader stabilisation effort.

Education

Education is another top priority for the public, and for stabilisation goals. A broadly functioning school system will engage a large segment of the youth population in constructive activities on an ongoing basis. The day-to-day routine thus generated for many households has a stabilising psychological impact on society by creating a sense of normalcy. The large numbers of teachers and support personnel involved in running a school system add to both the economic and stabilising benefits of the education intervention.

The inclination in many stabilisation programmes is to focus on rehabilitating the physical structures of schools. However, with the imperative of engaging youth and creating demonstrable examples of positive change, the priority should be the human dimensions of the rehabilitation process—the students and teachers. Even if classes must be held outdoors, the stabilisation benefits of mobilising this sector will prove significant. Physical reconstruction (which will be a multi-year effort) can unfold on a parallel track.

In considering development initiatives in fragile states, it is important to recognise that governments have rarely been the sole providers of essential services. Accordingly, it is unrealistic to organise stabilisation efforts on this premise. Rather, community health and education networks are more often a patchwork of private hospitals, clinics, schools, non- governmental organisations, and neighbourhood groups. As with all development interventions, though, sustainability needs to be considered and redundancies avoided. Development outcomes arise from an ongoing effort, not from quick-hitting interventions. Consequently, development initiatives should attempt to build on

existing networks, thereby leveraging economies of scale. Regardless of who is providing the service, national governments have an important policy-setting, co-ordination, and harmonisation role.

Conclusion

Stabilising fragile states is a central security challenge of the early twenty-first century. While these states may seem marginal on the global landscape, when ignored, the threat to the broader international community is heightened. The problem they pose is seemingly intractable, but there has in fact been a commendable record of stabilising fragile states over the past two decades. This has required integrated political, security, and development efforts, sustained over time, almost always with hands-on engagement by leading international actors. This recognises that stabilising fragile states is, in most cases, a state-building (rather than a rebuilding) process that must redress a long period of deterioration overseen by illegitimate leadership that has fostered deep inequities in a society. While opportunistic spoilers emerge in such contexts and can cause great devastation, by and large these insurgencies are fairly weak. They are a symptom of the
state's fragility and not normally the cause. Accordingly, while stabilisation efforts must
address organised violence, they should keep their focus on the overarching challenge: building legitimate and effective states that can earn and maintain the support of their populations.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Lund, Engaging Fragile States: Lessons Learned from Recent Research and Practice (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2009).